

English Department
Gavilan College
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Gavilan College
5055 Santa Teresa Blvd.
Gilroy, CA 95020

September 9, 2017

Dear Gavilan College Leaders,

Many of us in the English Department were alarmed and deeply disturbed to hear the recent news about the Gavilan student athletes who were dismissed from the football team. The media accounts describe a process that on its face seems astonishingly disrespectful and unnecessarily cruel to these young men, many of whom uprooted their lives to travel across the country and play for Gavilan.

According to media reports, these students were accused of receiving “free” rent, along with other violations of CCC rules. A concerned mother, we are told, investigated and found that these young men were living in substandard conditions with more than 17 people crammed into three rooms. It is troublesome enough to think of any of our students living like this. It was equally if not more distressing to hear of Gavilan’s reaction when this situation went public.

Even if we set aside questions of how these students could have come to be in such a position, it seems reasonable to expect that the college, once alerted to the situation, would demonstrate concern for the students’ well being and go out of our way to see what we could legally do to help them. Instead, a decision was made to dismiss them from the team. We recognize that there are rules governing how much and what kind of help we can offer students. We acknowledge that we may not have the entire story, coming as it did mostly from social media and news networks. The September 11 letter from Kathleen Rose, while welcome as an official statement from our leadership, did little to address the underlying concerns. We fear this incident is not as isolated as we would like to think, and it paints a shameful picture indeed of our college, one that is difficult to reconcile with the compassionate people we all know ourselves to be.

We also heard that Gavilan offered these young men the option to remain at Gavilan as students, though no longer athletes. Given that they would have to pay out-of-state tuition and in-state rent, and that they feel as if the school that once encouraged them to enroll now seems to view them, in their own words, as “thugs” and “criminals,” this offer rings hollow. The solution of buying their airline tickets home, while perhaps expedient, was lacking in humanity. It’s hard to imagine that the very people who were supposed to advocate for these students appeared to encourage their departure rather than use the opportunity and the resources spent sending them away to help them better integrate into the Gavilan community.

It seems that we have done more than simply fail these students. It looks very much as if we deliberately allowed the biggest portion of the responsibility and consequences to fall squarely on the shoulders of the people with the least amount of agency or means to improve the situation. This situation was preventable. It was our duty to ensure that it was prevented. Not only did we fail to prevent it; we compounded that failure by shifting the blame to those least equipped to deal with it.

In our mission statement, we at Gavilan commit to cultivating “learning and personal growth in students of all backgrounds and abilities” and to helping “prepare students for success in a dynamic and multicultural world.” As English teachers, we have always stood behind this commitment. This situation, however, reveals the stark contrast between the claims we make and the reality of what happens to students like these. This is not an indictment of the entire Athletic Department; we know that there are many staff and faculty in that department doing phenomenal work with our student athletes, often with little recognition and community support. However, this incident does reveal something troubling about our campus culture as a whole.

What happened to these students implicates the entire Gavilan community. Many of us in the English department have heard stories about the poverty, hunger, and isolation our out-of-state athletes face. We have been hearing these stories for years. Some of us have brought food to share; many have expressed sympathy or even anger that such stories are common. We trusted, however, that there were mechanisms in place that would address the problems on an institutional level, so our advocacy rarely extended beyond individuals in our own classrooms. We are realizing now that these problems have not been addressed and perhaps have even been ignored. It took a situation like this to reveal practices that too often seem to result in vulnerable students becoming even more marginalized. We no longer trust that anyone is addressing the problem on an institutional level. We acknowledge that when we see vulnerable students vilified and punished for the failure of leadership on our campus, to remain silent is to remain complicit.

We look to you, the leaders of our community, to guide us in some necessary introspection, and to confront what the treatment of these young men suggests about Gavilan’s campus culture and the sincerity of its mission. We ask to be informed about what actions are being taken to address the conditions that led to this situation. Additionally, we ask that you openly share the results of any ongoing inquiries or investigations as part of a transparent effort to help the entire community understand what happened and what steps will be taken to prevent it from happening again. We as a department pledge our efforts to do whatever is necessary to bring our actions in line with our ideals so that we can with integrity and certainty reclaim our mission statement, knowing that our actions reflect it, that all our students can rely on it, and that the full weight of the entire Gavilan community is behind it.

Sincerely,

The Gavilan College English Department

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